A PLACE FOR THE SINGING OF ANGELS

Isaiah 40:1-5

Luke 2:8-16

December 23, 1973

JMB

Several ~~Not too many~~ years ago it became ~~suddenly~~ fashionable to be ~~strongly~~ critical of the secular celebration of Christmas. A great hue and cry went up from the pulpits of the land, railing against commercialism-materialism. Religious journals were filled with polemic essays regarding the cultural intrusions into a sacred feast. Scholars dug into the history books and reminded us that the early Christians chose December 25 as the date to celebrate Christ's birth because the Romans were observing the end of the calendar year in a bacchanalian, week-long bash beginning on that date. Christians needed something of their own to celebrate, and the birth of Christ, until that time not assigned a date, was observed simultaneously with the seven day Roman orgy. The implication, of course, was that history had repeated itself; that the birth of Jesus was still running a poor second to a colorful, pagan and openly sinful secular festival.

There was authentic resentment in the air. Christians felt that something very dear and sacred was being exploited. It seemed terribly wrong that the birth of the Prince of Peace should be used as the occasion to present one's own children with real life machine guns; or that the birth of the savior should be the opportunity to get drunk and grab a secretary at the office party; or that the occasion of God's greatest gift, given freely in love, should somehow come out in the form of a Santa Clause whose first question to the children is always "Have you been good?" which, the psychologists remind us, is to say that good things happen to those who have been good - the precise opposite of the real message of Christmas: - namely, that something good has happened to all men quite apart from their past performance.

Part of that is autobiographical. I used to feel that way - strongly. And, in a sense, I still do. Hard as I try, I can't help but be offended by ~~the plastic baby Jesus blinking on and off~~ some of the crassness of our culture's Christmas. But, I'm beginning to see it all in a new light. I coming to view this cultural upheaval ~~called Christmas~~ as an expression of something very deep in the human spirit; call it the universal need for love; call it a longing for meaning, - a tragic groping for hope in a world that often seems hopeless; call it a clutching at wonder and mystery in a world that comes on pretty harshly. Whatever it is, I'm convinced that Christmas touches everyone rather deeply; that it calls out of us emotions and feelings that are honestly ours, but that remain undisturbed and unexpressed throughout the rest of the year.

The depth at which Christmas hits us is reflected also in the fact that the holiday season is very difficult for many people. In an article in the December issue of A.D., Janet Harbison Penfield, answers the question "Why Some People Dread Christmas" by quoting T.S. Eliot:

"People change, and smile, but the agony abides
Time the destroyer is time the preserver." (~~The Dry Salvages~~)

Time preserves memories, hurts, griefs - in a softened form to be sure, but they are there on some back shelf in our minds. And Christmas somehow lays them bare. Lonliness, that is borne stoically eleven months of the year, becomes unbearable in December. Fractured relationships that are part of the status quo suddenly want healing. An article in the Indianapolis Star last week documented the fact that every counselor knows; namely, that family problems increase around Christmas. The reason seems to be that at Christmas we see the ads and commercials showing the serene homestead, complete with grandparents sitting in front of the fire, children decorating the tree, mother happily in the kitchen and its just not that way for a lot of people. And so an emotional explosion occurs: frustration, guilt, feelings of failure and inadequacy come rushing to the surfaee and all too often boil over.

In any case, regardless of the theological freight we bring to Christmas, it comes at us fully loaded. Regardless of what we believe, we get caught up in a celebration that hits us at the point of our deepest needs and sensitivities. Let's reflect on that briefly.

There is, first of all, a universal response to Christmas, that might be called sentimental. James Wharton observes that: "Even at its hectic worst, the Christm as season is an attempt by millions of people to protest. To protest against dullness and sameness, to protest against the usual joyless routines as the last word about us human beings. To protest that there has to be something more for people than life ordinarily offers." I think there is something to that: ~~quite apart from the birth of Jesus Christ~~ we have a need to celebrate: to interupt routine with joy and laughter. Beyond that, I think we have a need to reaffirm our love for family and friends: we need to reaffirm who we are by remembering and celebrating our own childhood. And so we decorate our homes with bright color, and we invite friends in, and we are very careful to see that customs and traditions that are part of our history are maintained unchanged each year.

[redacted] Christmas is the [redacted]X opportunity for that to happen. And rather than resenting it as a cultural intrusion I'm inclined today to be grateful for it, and to believe that God is not entirely unhappy with what has transpiried because of his son's birth.

But there is a deeper level at which Christmas touches us, and although we may not be able to assign the proper words to define it, it is there - universally - nevertheless. Call it psychological, or emotional or spiritual.

Dr. Thomas Harris, in his best seller "I'm O.K. - You're O.K." maintains that what all of us need most is a feeling of being acceptable to others as we are - and the consequent feeling of self acceptance. To use his [redacted] "I'm O.K." Harris shows how the human experience ordinarily works against that basic need. Unintentionally we teach our children that their acceptability is based on performance. When they explore the world - and the antique vase happens to be in the path of the exploration we say - ("that's bad - don't touch!") At 18 months the child really can't assign different values to an antique vase as opposed to a toy - and so the message he hears is ("you are bad for wanting to explore and touch - you are not O.K.") That's not a very good illustration because one hopes that the child will learn to distinguish between vases and toys; but philosophically, much of what we do [redacted] to our children - is rooted in the same base: ("You can be O.K. - if you do what I want you to do.") The result is a whole culture full of adults who feel inadequate, guilty and not O.K. because they've never really lived up to the expectation level superimposed by parents. Life becomes a battle to win - to succeed and no prize, no pinnacle of success is ever adequate, because what is really happening is the struggle for acceptability to others, and relaxed confident acceptance of self.

And here comes Christmas simply and eloquently saying that we are "O.K.": that God loves us enough to become one of us: that he loves mothers and fathers enough to entrust his own son to a family: that all men are acceptable to him: there are no strings tied to his love, no conditions attached to his grace. Here comes a baby in a manger saying "You are O.K.": God is pleased with you: God loves you". And so we respond to it out of the depths even when we're not sure why.

Or to come at it from another, but similar direction, Erik Erickson, very [redacted] famous writer and teacher of developmental psychology describes "Basic Trust" as the necessary component of a healthy personality. New born infants learn it in the [redacted]

experience of nursing: there is a world out there that can be trusted to provide for my hunger. That experience, Erikson, taught, must be repeated at each stage along the way of growth. When a child leaves the home he needs to know that his widening world can be depended on to be responsive to his needs. If he has that, he will be relaxed, confident and able to function appropriately. If that is denied him, however, - and battered children, or children abandoned or moved from one foster home to another are the best examples - the world will beging to look frighteneing and alien, full of threat and people who are potential enemies. The end result is the paranoid who can trust nobody and is convinced that everyone is out to get him.

Now, put that basic psychological theory in the context of theology. We need "Basic Trust": and as we become aware that there is more to reality than we can touch and feel: as we begin to think about who we are, and why we are here and where we are going, we need that same trust. To be without it is to be in despair - and that, the philosophers tells us, is the particular predicament of modern man. That is what the "Death of God" means. There is no more to life than what comes at us through our senses. The vastness of the universe is empty: or to borrow from Shakespear:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
signifying nothing" ~~Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5, Line 19~~ qts

I continue to be amazed at the philosophic integrity of children. I'm convinced that a basic education in logic and constructive theology is to be had just by listening to children and never laughing at their deductions. In any case, one of mine, - during a T.V. commercial last week said, "Daddy - I must be wierd - they way I think" My antennae went up, and always on the alert for sermon material I suggested that we talk about it - and I wasn't disappointed. The lesson continued. "I mean - like - well - no one will even remember me when I'm dead." I tried to answer that in terms of being rembered by children and grandchildren: but that's transparent, and not really the answer - or the question. Oriental religion posits immortality in one's offspring, but I don't know a thing about my forebearers. And so the conversation went to the heart of the issue: "Well - I mean - what's the use in living if all you do is die?"

No philosopher ever said it more eloquently. On that final juggernaut Erikson's "Basic Trust", Harris's "I'm O.K." - come to a screeching halt. Our basic need as human beings has to do finally with eternity. The story is told of the bright young preacher, just out of seminary, having read Paul Tillich, who asked an elderly parishoner "what is your ultimate concern?" And the answer came: "whether the Ultimate is concerned about me!"

That's where it is for all of us. If our religion is worth anything, it must tell us that we matter, that our lives count for something however modest they turn out to be; that somehow we are set in a universe that is friendly or trustworthy. One writer put it in terms that are almost poetic - "It is the function of religion to affirm that the source out of which life comes and into which it disappears intends the fulfillment rather than the frustration of those values we hold to be fundamental." (S.Keen Apology for Wonder, P.204)

Another writer, Phillips Brooks, in 1868 - thinking about the birth of Jesus Christ wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

That - finally - is the deepest and dearest meaning of Christmas: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." The birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem means that God is alive: that the universe is friendly: that we are safe - ultimately and eternally safe in the love of God himself. - tell Dyman story

That "best of all news" is for all men: even for those who don't really know what they're celebrating at Christmas. After all, a group of rough shepherds heard it first: they weren't theologians; in a traditional sense they weren't even religious men. But in the middle of their drab and boring task - they could hear the singing of angels: singing that filled them with such wonder and excitement that they dropped what they were doing and ran to Bethlehem.

So may it be for you this year. In the middle of your holiday - make a place for the singing of angels. For life - your life - can be saved by that.

" Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will come to all the people;
for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." AMEN

Come to us, Father, in the quiet moments. Come in loud happy moments. Come in love and joy; come in memories of Chirstmases past. Help us to hear - in and through it all - the singing of angels. AMEN